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ABSTRACT

The library has traditionally been a center for independent learning and individual self-directed education. The Dallas Public Library, in cooperation with Southern Methodist University, set up a library independent study project (ISP). College credit could be obtained through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP); however, learning for self-enrichment was also encouraged. The criteria for measuring the effectiveness of the ISP were librarian and student satisfaction. In a study of the Dallas ISP, librarians found that they spent most of their time explaining the CLEP and ISP concepts to students, and little of their time in readers' guidance. They also felt that they lacked time for more individual guidance, though they were able to provide some. The number of students completing CLEP tests (125) was disappointing in relation to the number of study guides taken (6,000). However, many students were pleased to find a place to continue learning. The library plans to continue its involvement and experiments with independent learning projects. (LS)

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CRACKING THE STRUCTURE

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A PAPER PREPARED FOR PRESENTATION AT THE
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CONCERNING THE DALLAS PUBLIC LIBRARY'S ROLE
IN NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION
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Cracking the Structure

It has been more than three years since the Dallas Public Library entered into planning stages for a library independent study project. The agencies interested in funding such a project were "seeking frank, honest advice and guidance on whether public libraries could be effectively utilized as agents in this program...." Our goal was to present findings on the effectiveness of one public library in cooperation with an institution of higher education (SMU) to asist adults pursuing self-education. The proposal limited such self-education to that directed toward academic recognition in area colleges and universities, but this limited view was not ever considered in the study itself. While CLEP was the vehicle for college credit, study and learning for self-enrichment was encouraged throughout the project.

The objectives through which the study would be presented were to use the library as a learning environment adding to its resources with SMU faculty members preparing study guides and reading lists, and offering individual and group tutoring. The expertise of the librarian would guide the student's preparation for study through a choice of reading materials, and aid him in making decisions on his learning goals through the provision of educational information available from CLEP and area colleges and universities.

The criteria which we utilized to measure our effectiveness in assisting the adults were librarian and student satisfaction --each was inter-dependent upon the other.

Once the proposal was accepted and the Independent Study Project began each one of us involved with it became an independent student. We were all taking part in a learning situation, in which the first step was to assess our experiential knowledge. We knew that the public library has always functioned as a learning resource center for the traditional student and as such has always had the potential for serving as a "peoples' university." The public library has also always served as a resource center for non-traditional or extra-curricular study. The public library has been the institution which has always been practically concerned with the experiential learning the individual student brings to those self-study tasks he sets for himself. Such experiential learning has served as the input from which the librarian has traditionally arrived at an assessment of the baseline or level at which the student will start his reading. Interest-motivated independent learning episodes are demonstrated to the librarian daily when library patrons pursue hobbies, borrow car repair manuals and cookbooks or add new titles or authors to a growing interest in a subject area.

It was also well established from experience that the public library placed no demands upon its users, it is a place which they may visit at will at times they have free, and it is usually within geographic proximity which makes it easily accessible.

The library had long provided its users with community information and brochures on cultural events occurring in other community educational agencies, such as museums, theaters, and concert halls as well as non-credit community service classes offered at area

colleges and universities. Educators knew all about theories of learning which recognized the need for organization from "simplified wholes to more complex wholes," but Dewey had trained librarians in this practice many years ago. These facts we knew; they were what we had to bring to the Project; they represented the level at which we would start our learning experience.

It appeared very simple to move a step from the type of help we had always offered the library learner to help for the library learner who would wish to pursue study for structured curricula subjects in an unstructured manner. We entered this new undertaking in a "spirit of change," as Ms. Lillian Bradshaw so aptly terms it, not really believing there would be any noticeable need for change.

The concepts with which we envisioned working during the project provided no clear profile of the anticipated student other than that he would be an adult who was eager for learning which had been previously unavailable to him due to possible pressures of time, family responsibilities, and lack of funds. These circumstances would have made his attendance on a campus impossible. It was expected that this student might be reluctant to answer questions about himself; so his personal privacy was in no way to be invaded. Consequently any evaluation of the student would depend entirely upon the librarian/student relationship we expected to develop.

The student was to be encouraged to study on his own for a general background in a subject area even though he might be studying for a CLEP test. The total learning opportunity was to be completely with-

out structure: no enrollments, no time limits, no classes, no assignments. The student was free to choose any resources made available through the library, and he would be encouraged to keep his study area broad, branching off wherever his interest might lead him. The library would serve as a source of material expressive of all available information and viewpoints on a subject enabling the student to acquire an unbiased view, choosing from his growing knowledge those ideas which he found valid.

While the ISP concept recognized that the student could choose his own goals, and he could learn to study on his own, he must also be apprised of structures and areas where his desire for total independence could not be met in the present educational set-up. He would have to be made cognizant of terms in society other than his own chosen ones, which might influence the realization of his goals. There were realistic structures and dependencies within which he must operate once he translated his new learning into practical use. By this knowledge, he would also be alerted to the possibilities of educational change for which he might be the advocate in the future.

The function of the library as seen by the ISP concept was that of a viable learning resource center. Five branch libraries in differing socio-economic neighborhoods were chosen as sites for the study of the role of the public library and its effectiveness in serving as the catalyst in releasing learning from its time/space sets.

While the libraries engaged in the study would become the free and unstructured learning centers, the librarians would be responsible for creating a comfortable and relaxed environment for learning. It

was not expected that the student would need help that would be appreciably different from the normal readers' services offered by the librarians. No book purchases were planned particularly for the independent student since the concept was that he could learn from the existing library collections. If, however, there was demand from large numbers of independent learners, the libraries were free to order from their existing book budgets.

While the role of the librarian was not expected to be greatly changed from that which he had always assumed, there was a considered opinion that the librarian would come to know more about the background goals, aspirations, and needs of those individuals who would be learning independently. While this relationship to the student would be dependent upon a mutual exchange of information and ideas it was not considered to be a "counseling" role. Elements of input from the librarian on possible steps open for realization of goal desires would be offered in much the same manner as library materials are presented for the reader's choice.

The partnership between the library and the SMU academic community was to be an important aspect of the study, particularly in offering special aids to help the student acquire independence in his study. Study guides and reading lists in those subjects covered by CLEP were to serve as introductions to the books which the library had available. Once the informational inputs on educational opportunities were presented to the student, the decision as to whether to study for the sake of a particular test was his choice. When the

student had chosen his area of study the guides and the librarian would stress learning rather than mere preparation for a test. Testing is merely a device to measure the extent of an individual's knowledge; the knowledge itself was to be the goal. With this concept, reading matter could include historical novels, fictionalized biographies, travel books, whatever the reader found pleasurable. There was to be no set textbook, and the study guide was to suggest only the framework of a discipline. The subject or discipline was to be described in an easy to read, informal style which would "turn on" the student to learning more about the area of study. It would be expected that the guide would illustrate how one study area related to other disciplines, and how it related to the individual who taught it or learned it. The reading lists were suggested readings only. They were designed to allow the student freedom of choice among a wide variety of books, covering differing viewpoints. A book from the reading list, another recommended by the librarian, or one the student chose himself while browsing the shelves would fill in the shape he wished his learning experience to develop.

It was expected that in some instances even more subject expertise would be required by the learner, and for that need academic tutoring was included as part of the SMU input. Such tutoring would preferably be handled in group help sessions, but individual help was also available.

The responsibility for learning lay totally with the student. He was free to make use of the resources the library and SMU offered in

any was he saw fit. He had the opportunity to combine various options to learning in ways which would be most profitable and pleasurable for himself. Once the student had achieved his own sense of direction it would be expected that he would direct the librarian as to his tutoring needs.

Once we started working and learning on our own in ISP we found that much of what we had expected from independent study was valid. There were differences between some of the concepts and their implementation, but in general we had been on the right track. The student was as eager and excited about this new option to learning as we had anticipated, but he usually wanted to study for credit. He often expected and wanted to enroll in library classes; structure was less important to him than it was to us. In the past five months we have been working with students in two library learning centers, and if they wish to enroll we do not correct that interpretation. The curriculum itself is a form of structure as is the study guide or even the book, and perhaps the student needs to enroll to afford himself some sense of continuity in a learning situation. The manner of learning itself is not set in conformity; so if enrollment offers some sense of security we accept that. Structure was one of the contradictory influences which operated in ISP. We found that both the library and SMU had structures within which they must operate, and society had erected structured concepts around the educational process which was reflected by the student. The very fact that the colleges and universities in the Dallas community began to give credit for CLEP was move toward breaking down some of the structure,

the fact that students did come to the library to choose resources to study for college-level examinations made another crack in structure. The professor moved off campus and talked with non-registered students, encouraging them to study and learn to test-out of college courses, and independent students began to study and pass examinations without the use of a standard classroom lecture and textbook.

We had not expected that it would be so difficult to explain the concept of independent study to the student. The librarians found they spent most of their time with the student in explaining CLEP and independent study and very little time working with the student in reader's guidance. There were some learners who were able to move right in to independent study, using study guides and reading lists and achieving the test goal, but others required much more help than we had anticipated. Some of these people were not yet ready to study with the book alone. They used the tutoring and help session services, but too often they failed to complete their study or return to the library for help. The close relationship which we had expected to develop between student and librarian was never achieved to a great extent. Some students did come into the libraries and talk with the librarians, praising the guides or reporting on a successful testing experience. Some talked with the librarians about their goals and planned for their study. More called the Project Office or stopped to talk about continuing their learning through independent study. We learned that many of the students were not as shy or talking about their problems and aspirations as we had anticipated, in fact they wanted to have someone with whom they could talk. Many had decided

at the age of thirty that they were too old to learn, and were pleased that someone believed they could still continue education. Some brought transcripts to prove what they had accomplished, others called to tell of their excitement in personal accomplishment. We found that whatever the goal or need which motivated the student to respond to independent study he came to the library because it was the place where he was ready to try a learning experience. He felt comfortable using the library as his learning center, and once his confidence in himself was attained he was able to move on into the formal educational institution. We were told many times of the excitement that was achieved in learning and of the change made in an individual's life. As one student stated, "This is the most meaningful experience the library has ever offered me."

These were the high moments of the Project, but statistics were more sobering. Over 6,000 study guides were taken by prospective learners, and at the end of the Project we knew of only 124 students who had taken CLEP tests. Admittedly there would be others with whom we had had no contact and some who had studied and learned for personal enrichment, but the vast differential in study materials and measurable attainment troubled us. The librarians engaged in working with the study felt that the student needed more time than they had free to give him. The hours which were standard rush hours in the five libraries also brought the independent student. He required time-consuming informational input, and often the information needed to be repeated several times before full understanding was reached. If he returned for help or to talk about his study, the

same problem of limited time with the librarian existed. He frequently needed to know how to study on his own--how to use a book and fit it to the study guide. The librarians suggested it would be good if there were one person available at all times to work with the independent student. This would assure them of continuity with the same individual. Added support for the student was believed to be one of the needs in the ISP study.

Information inputs on educational matters were of highest importance in order that the student could make wise decisions as to what he wanted to study. One of the most glaring lacks we discovered within our community was that of reliable college level information. The Dallas Public Library had been active in accumulating community education information for some time, and the Community Education Office had published or been active in working with other institutions in preparing publications on all types of community information, but the student who was interested in entering or coming back into the educational stream wanted to know how many credits he could get with a CLEP test, what score would be required, how rapidly could he prepare himself to take a test, or any other piece of information which was pertinent to his very personal interest and problems. CLEP was relevant, it promised to satisfy bread and butter or other daily needs. Degrees and education were important--we might consider the degree fostered a false value system, but where these people worked and lived that value system was real. ISP got them the information they needed, found referral persons on each area campus who were interested in relating to them, and gave hours of time to personal one-to-one

information exchange. This type of delivery system is not one which can be totally replaced by a printed page or a computer, it has too many variables and is far too personal. While all of our librarians shied away from the word counseling with some degree of fear, all of us became quite able to reassure and encourage. We learned to use our personal educational experiences as reference, and we learned to wait until the student was assured enough before we referred him to the formal educational institution. When he visited a campus we knew he could receive reliable information, and if he did not understand what was told him he knew he was to come back to us for help, or if his information was occasionally contrary to what it should have been we became his advocate. The library emerged as a coordinating center of information through which the student could learn how to gather his own inputs, and perhaps more importantly, he could learn to sort out the kinds of information he would need to make his decisions. At a later stage in ISP Retired Senior Volunteer teachers counseled for us also.

While we still stressed that a thorough knowledge of the subject area would provide more assurance of good test results, for those who were time-limited we made efforts to help them narrow their study efforts to those areas of more importance for the test. Once an individual has learned on his own and achieved his goal through his own efforts, he will continue to learn independently. Even though he may choose the test goal, he has enhanced his self image and provided himself enrichment through learning, and he will not be afraid to try again. The library was not offering "teaching," it was offering

resources through which the individual might learn on his own, and he was to be allowed the option of shaping his own learning project as he desired. We could do no less than give him all the necessary inputs available, without condescension or judgement.

The library found that coordination with another educational institution was possible, and the library discovered it could take the initiative in presenting an alternative to formal education to its community and gain the support of the educational institutions. Educational change is not in the future, it is here and now; we are into a learning society, and libraries have been sitting back for years, knowing that people learned in them and never exploiting this knowledge. If it must be called recruiting, perhaps we should accept that; libraries have something to offer. The physical features of the library in which learning occurs are only the stage settings, if the library can demonstrate that it really desires to offer the student a welcome atmosphere, then he will find that atmosphere comfortable for learning. He merely needs to know that the library is making every effort it can to meet his personal needs.

We who worked in ISP were continually evaluating our own performances because we were committed to making our concepts work, and as the relationships with students developed we became committed to the student's progress. Before the Project closed we knew that some users could learn and reach their goals through independent study, and our librarians were suggesting ways of meeting student needs in the future. The librarians had learned to accept and respect the student where he was--acknowledging that with proper aids he could

become successful in learning on his own. Through our own personal learning process it became evident that the same enthusiasm, personal interest, and warmth with which the librarian met the independent student would carry over to all of those he served.

Questions raised during ISP led the library to believe we needed one more year to more clearly define our role. The concepts we had, while valid, did not satisfy needs of those students who were less than independent learners. We also recognized needs for basic learning skills to enable some students to move on toward their chosen goals. CLEP information and the study guides were released to all libraries in the Dallas Public Library System, and the Independent Study Office was established. The library was committed to continue independent study, but exactly what forms it would take were not certain. In May of this year two experimental learning centers were set up in two branch libraries and 3D, a coordinative effort with the Dallas Independent School District, the Dallas County Community College District and Channel 13 Instructional Television was initiated. The resources and expertise of the four agencies are being combined in developing materials and ways of helping the student to learn on his own.

Response to 3D leads us to believe we have found the right approach to answering expressed community needs. But we find ourselves still engaged in a continuing learning process concerning the role of the library which probably will never end if we continue to respond to societal changes.